

Senegal  
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# Women Claiming Space in Mosques

A subject that has largely been overlooked until recently and whose implications for the various fields of Islamic studies are wide-ranging, is female mosque attendance and the corresponding spatial organization that it entails. In Senegal the rise and influence of the Mouvement Islamique has granted women a place in the mosque formerly denied them by the *turuq*, the Sufi brotherhoods. Degrees of spatial marginalization, on the one hand, and appropriation, on the other, vary. Much of the current literature on Senegal maintains that the impact of Islamism is still relatively small. Although religious observance in Senegal is relatively strong and predominantly Sufi in its orientation, the recent infiltration of 'Wahhabi' ideas has given women greater access to public places of worship.

Within the *turuq* the mosque plays no role in the religious life of women. Rather, women's religious activity has revolved around alternative structures, such as pilgrimages to saints' tombs. Indeed, the notion of Sufism representing 'popular' Islam often carries the implication that women opt for this in favour of the more puritanical form of Islam because it gives them greater room to manoeuvre in the religious activities of their choice. In the case of Senegal, however, only a few women hold positions of authority within the *turuq*, and, surprisingly, these isolated cases have lead some scholars to comment that 'maraboutic and brotherhood Islam will be thus the religion of women par excellence'.<sup>1</sup> In reality, with the possible exception of the Layenne *tariqa*, women's position is clearly inferior to that of men and in no place is this more apparent than in the mosque.

Most Senegalese mosques, in fact, whether Tijani, Mouride, or Qadr, to mention the most important *turuq*, exclude the participation of young women altogether and relegate those women who are no longer considered to be capable of tempting men to small buildings that are disconnected from the mosque proper. The situation noted by Paul Marty during the French colonization of Senegal at the turn of the last century has virtually remained unchanged:

'We see, however, a few old women in certain mosques at the Friday prayer. Elsewhere, when there is a sufficiently substantial and tenacious core of devotees, a small boarded or thatched cabin is constructed for them in a corner of the courtyard; and from there, alone among themselves, they can follow the mosque service.'<sup>2</sup>

With the exception of the two great mosques of Dakar and Touba, the majority of mosques fit this description. Explanations given point to the fact that according to Maliki tradition, women are not obliged to attend Friday prayer and young women should not attend at all. Mouride informants in Thiès, including a prominent marabout, stressed that women should not frequent the mosque because they distract men<sup>3</sup> and because their only reason for coming to the mosque is to 'think about men'. This attitude helps to explain why there are special male guards in the Great Mosque of Touba, the 'Mecca' of the Mouride *tariqa*, to separate women past the menopause from all other women, including those with small children. The former are allowed into the mosque precinct in a wing designed to accommodate them, whereas the latter must make do with the marble pavement or the gravel outside.

Generally, Mouride women are taught how to pray but rarely are taught Arabic so that they can understand what they are reciting. Their Muslim education does not exceed rote learning of a few *suras* from the Qur'an; hence there is little scope for them



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to further their religious knowledge. By contrast, reformist Islam encourages religious education and this often takes place in the mosque, in particular among Ibadou, who derive their name from the Qur'anic term *Ibadu ar-Rahman*, or slaves of the Merciful, organized in the Jamaatou Ibadou Rahmane group. Henceforth the term Ibadou is widely used to designate those who veil, wear a beard, and pray with their arms crossed. As one Ibadou informant put it, 'people are hungry for the truth' and the mosque becomes the ideal locus to convey this message. In order to fulfil this mission, the mosque must open its doors to women as well as men.

## Les filles voilées

Reformist Islam is not new to Senegal, yet it has only been in the last fifteen years that such strands have had an explicit and very tangible influence on women. The most obvious markers of this shift in religious orientation are undoubtedly the *hijab* and frequenting the mosque, both of which are in breach of local interpretations of what a Muslim woman should or should not do. Instead of following one particular school of thought, the Ibadous claim to follow all four Sunni schools of law. Female Sunni informants, known as *les filles voilées*, would quote a number of *hadiths* to support women's presence in the mosque and would admit that often the mosque was the place where they learned such *hadiths*. Most of the respondents to my questionnaires were young students with some proficiency in French. Most had started to wear the *hijab* and frequent the mosque in their early twenties, in the mid-1990s.

Some of the first women to veil did so under the influence of the Jamaatou Ibadou Rahmane. The style of the veil has distinct Middle Eastern origins, pinned or sewn under the chin, often trimmed with lace and rarely going below the bosom. Colours are varied and match with brightly coloured clothes and extendible petty-coats, used to cover feet during prayer. By contrast, the newly emerging reformist movement is introducing much more sober colours and styles, including the dark, opaque chador-like garment and the use of socks. The most eloquent proof of the growing number of

Sunni-Ibadous is reflected in the University of Dakar. In the university's mosque, during peak times, especially Friday prayers, few of the dark *hijabs* remain. Their wearers frequent a reformist mosque, more in keeping with their attire, where the segregation of the sexes is marked by a main road.

The outskirts of the capital are witnessing a mushrooming of new Ibadou mosques. And the more mosques open their doors to women, the more women come there to pray. Many of my respondents said they came to learn about their religion or to hear the sermon of the imam in their own language rather than in Arabic, as is the practice in the majority of mosques affiliated to a *tariqa*.

## Women's space

The metaphor of opening the doors to women has a literal manifestation as well. In many of the so-called Ibadou mosques, on Fridays, when there is an overflow of worshippers, the back door is left open so that women praying outside can still participate visually in the ceremony. Sometimes this technique is also used to accommodate women during their monthly periods when they cannot enter the mosque. This simple measure ensures that they can continue with their religious classes on *tafsir* or *hadith* while not being able to take up their usual space for the five daily prayers directly behind the men.

Another way of accommodating women below the age of menopause is to allow small children into the mosque. In one mosque, on Tuesday afternoons women from all parts of Dakar and from different social backgrounds meet to be taught Arabic, *hadith*, and the Qur'an as well as general knowledge. They bring their children and sit outside as described above when they are ritually unclean. This little prayer room for women situated in the courtyard of the men's mosque has been renamed Mosquée Aisha. The connotations of the name are twofold: one refers to the historical figure of Aisha, reputed to have been a lady of learning, and the other makes a clear reference to the Sunni/Ibadou orientation of the establishment.

One of the most significant examples of the transformation of mosque space into a

women's area is in Cité Soprim, also in the outskirts of Dakar. Here the former women's prayer room adjacent to the mosque proper has been knocked down and redesigned by a female architect, also an Ibadou. The new women's space includes a wide window to allow the women to participate visually in the Friday prayer. Senegalese mosques usually comprise no more than one floor. Cité Soprim is an exception and so is the new mosque on the south side of the island of Saint Louis, Mosquée Ihsan. In both these cases architectural inspiration came from the Middle East: in the former the intention was to accommodate the women on the upper storey but this idea was later abandoned for logistical reasons. Firmly entrenched in the Tijani tradition, Mosquée Ihsan controversially accommodates women in the gallery above the men.

Today, not only are more women frequenting the mosque, their very presence in the mosque embodies the notion of appropriation. Spatially, appropriation is reflected in the varying degrees to which women have gained either physical or visual access to what was previously out of bounds for them in the men's part of the mosque. In terms of generation, younger women have often gone to considerable lengths to don the *hijab* and frequent the mosque regularly, in breach of local custom, which discourages and even threatens them. Islamic dress code acts as a means to access public prayer places and signifies a greater acquaintance with their religious rights and duties. Similarly, degrees of covering point to varying doctrinal orientations and serve as identity markers.

## Notes

1. Originally in French: 'l'islam maraboutique et confrérique serait alors par excellence la religion des femmes'. C. Coulon cited in C. Laborde, *La confrérie Layenne et les Lébou du Sénégal: Islam et culture traditionnelle en Afrique* (Institut d'Études Politiques de Bordeaux, 1995), 86.
2. Originally in French: 'On voit toutefois quelques vieilles femmes dans certaines mosquées, à la prière du vendredi. Ailleurs, quand il y a un noyau de dévotes assez important et tenace, on leur construit une petite case de planches ou de chaume, dans un coin de la cour; et de là, seules entre elles, elles peuvent suivre l'office de la mosquée.' P. Marty, *Études de l'Islam au Sénégal* (Paris: Editions Larose, 1917), 38.
3. See also research by Olga F. Linares, which reveals the same attitude towards women: *Power, Prayer and Production: The Jola of Casamance, Senegal* (1992), 173.

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